BOYHOOD ON A CHICKEN RANCH
ON WESTERN AVENUE

Ben Burmester, As Told to Marilyn Bragdon

May 1989, Petaluma

There were twelve in our family including four brothers, three sisters, a maiden aunt and my grandparents. Grandma just lived there and was waited on. Grandpa was there too. They bought the ranch on Western Avenue in 1900. Father was the oldest of the family, and was sent from Germany to avoid the draft under the Kaiser. He worked in lumber. He returned to Germany and his family where the neighbors made life bad, because he'd avoided the draft. So he came back to the U.S. with his parents. His brothers were in the bakery business in San Francisco. They heard about the chicken business and came to Petaluma. One brother stayed in San Francisco.

Father met mother in the Lutheran Church on Keller Street which is now Alfred's Restaurant. German was spoken in the church, and because my sister was having difficulty learning English, the family left the Lutheran Church and joined the Methodist Church.

Our ranch on Western Avenue was 18 acres. We had six chicken houses, three brooder houses, and as many as 5,000 chickens at a time.

My brother, Ernie, was the one who stayed in the chicken industry on Western Avenue. My younger brother, Conrad, is in the hatchery business in Portland. He is Secretary-Treasurer of the Oregon-Washington Poultry Association and is now a broker of exotic birds. My sister, Mollie, is an Oakland teacher and dental hygienist and a docent at the Oakland Museum. My sister, Doris, was a WASP during the war and was a teacher in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Father lived into his 80's and mother lived into her 90's. She was a Benedetti; they developed the Willie Bird Turkey.

Daily routine: up at 6:30, milked two to three cows, mixed the feed (including kale, barley and meat scraps); the cooker cooked the mixture, we crumbled the mash into 20 buckets. Then at 7 a.m., a horse pulled our half sled/half wagon around the circle made by seven chicken houses while we dispensed feed into feed troughs. Next we ran the milk through a separator, had breakfast and were off to school. We walked until our older brother was able to drive. We were back home by 3:30-4:00 to do chores. We picked up dead chickens from the field and collected eggs (from 200-400 in each house). In winter we chopped wood. On Saturdays, we cleaned the houses and shot rats with shotguns. My aunt helped my mother clean and pack eggs. My sisters helped with candling of the eggs.

Mischievousness: We attended church on Sunday, then came home for dinner leaving our afternoons free. My

brother and I found some dynamite caps and would light them to blow holes in the ground. Once my sister and I got copper in our fingers from blowing up milk cans. Ernie and I made a cannon out of a pipe and cannon balls out of lead. We shot it off and the ball hit my brother on the foot. Once we brought home an old motorcycle to fix up. Mother said we couldn't ride it so we decided to make a boat/sled out of wood with an air propeller and engine attached. We launched it in Petaluma Creek where it ran but didn't go fast enough, so we added a water propeller, a Chevy engine and enlarged the boat but it never went fast enough.

I was given $1 allowance. My 4-H project my junior year in high school was building a brooder house in which to raise 500 pullets. I could raise three batches a year since it took four months for each batch. I made between $300 and $500 a batch. My uncle went on a vacation the year I was senior and I used his ranch to put in chickens, and earned $2,000 for college.

My 4-H advisors and my teachers encouraged me to go to Davis. It cost $12 a semester for registration at Davis. It cost $37 a month room and board in the fraternity house. I washed dishes at Davis to earn money. After a few years I transferred to Berkeley. I studied hard and was awarded the Bachelor of Science, Master of Arts, and Doctor of Philosophy Degrees. I was a lab technician at Berkeley for $50 a month.

After marrying, I was an instructor at the University of Illinois, then had a government job doing research at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Laboratory in East Lansing, Michigan. When World War II and many co-researchers went off to war, I found I needed to get my veterinarian degree in order to chair the department in chicken disease research. Chickens had many diseases; today every chicken is given six vaccines which are sometimes given twice.

profile

Ben Burmester: family man, microbiologist

Who: Ben Burmester, 78, microbiologist and internationally recognized in poultry diseases.

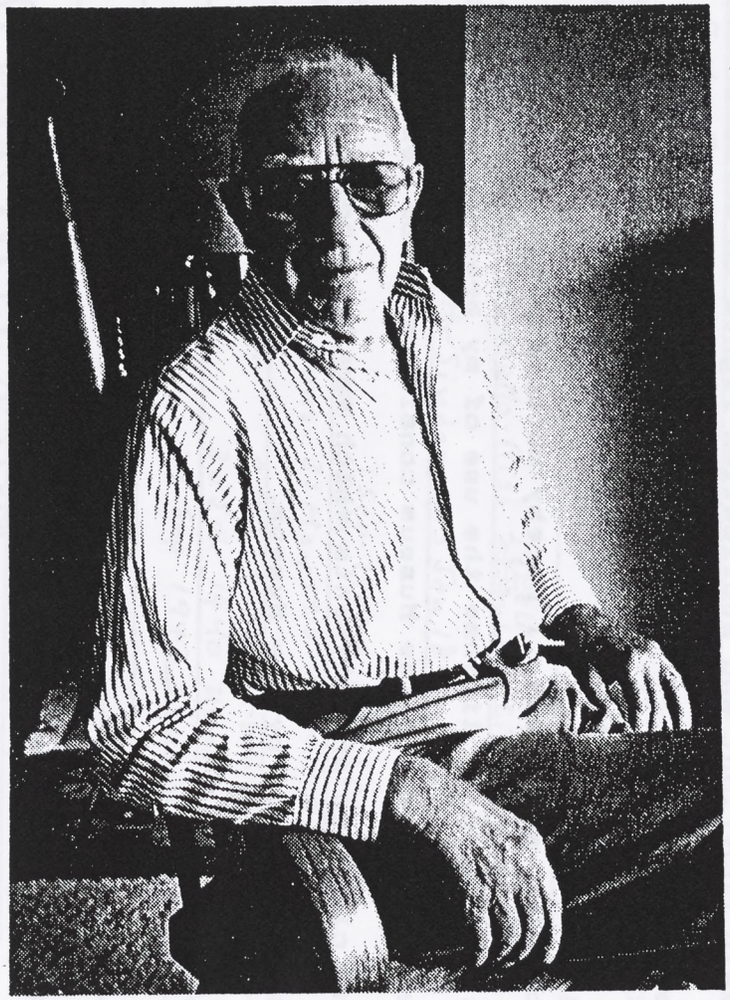
Family: Wife: Zoe Burmester; Children: Alan, 51; Bruce, 48, and Beth, 45. Grandchildren: seven.

Education: Attended primary and secondary schools in Petaluma. "I was able to earn, through a 4-H project, enough money to go to the University of California." He enrolled first at UC Davis but then transferred to UC Berkeley to study physiology. There he earned his bachelor's degree in 1932, his master's in 1933 and his doctorate in 1936. "In about 1947 I realized I needed a doctorate of veterinary medicine so I went back to school." He earned his DVM from Michigan State University at East Lansing in 1951.

Background: "I was born and raised in Petaluma on Western Avenue on a farm." His father was a German immigrant who first settled in the Fort Bragg area and worked in the lumber industry. Later he would move to Petaluma and try his hand at a growing industry: "I was raised on a chicken farm," Burmester recalled.

Changes in Petaluma: "It's gone from 8,000 population to, what is it, 41,000? All of the east side was a big hay farm, but the west side hasn't grown that much."

Memories of growing up in Petaluma: "School was a big part of my life, but I didn't time or inclination to go sports . . . I was busy every after school working with ather. We had vacations on the Russian River every summer for a week or so which was a highlight. The other part I remember . . . we did walk to town, but my father had an old Model T Ford he'd converted to a truck to drive eggs to town." Occasionally, his father would let an older brother use it to drive all the children to school, but there wouldn't be enough room for all of them to sit on the seats. "My brother Ernie and I used to ride on the rear fenders. You don't do that anymore. A rear fender on a Model T Ford isn't very wide."



Biggest accomplishment: "I directed the work that led to the Marek's Disease vaccine. It received worldwide recognition because it solved a very big problem in the poultry industry all over the world." Marek's Disease? "It's a disease that affects the lymph cells of the (chicken's) body." It causes tumors in various organs, including the brain, and eventually killed birds that contracted it. "It's a cancerous disease of various origins." He started research into the disease in 1940. "About 1969 we developed this vaccine that prevents Marek's Disease."

Biggest frustration: To a degree he cites the more than 25 years it took to develop the vaccine. "You might say it was frustrating because it was so slow." But, he said, he never really felt the frustration.

Was he ever discouraged?: "I suppose I'm one of those types: you go ahead and work on a problem. Overall you wonder how long it's going to take, at the same time you feel you are making progress if you look at the whole picture."

Best advice: "You shouldn't give up easily, you should continue pecking away at a problem, don't give up, don't be discouraged easily . . . Eventually it adds up to something significant. That, I suppose, is the important thing."

Honors: His resume shows 22 different awards or honors bestowed on him over 36 years as a researcher.

Interview by Tim Wright
Photo by Kristi Humphrey Ryder

Petaluma Argus-Courier
November 2 1988

PETALUMA HISTORICAL MUSEUM
Oral History Program

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PLACE Petaluma

DATE Feb 19 94

Ben R Bernardi
(Interviewee)

Maxine Darsey
(for the Petaluma Historical Museum)

PETALUMA HISTORICAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM
Oral History Program
Family History Questionnaire

	Name		Birthdate	Birthplace	Deceased? Date
Parents*	Carl F.D. Burmester		20 Aug 1870	Neukrug Germany	11 Oct. 1958 Petaluma
	Amalie R. Benedetti		21 Oct 1874	Cima Sappada Italy	10 June 1966 "
Brothers & Sisters	Anna F. Burmester		17 Sep. 1905	Petaluma	6 Feb - 1987
	Carl F.D. Burmester		30 Oct. 1906	Petaluma	—
	Amalie Marie	"	12 Jan. 1908	"	—
	Ben R.	"	13 Jun. 1910	"	—
	Ernest L.	"	14 Jan. 1912	"	—
	Conrad M.	"	19 Feb. 1914	"	—
	Francis D.	"	23 Nov. 1916	"	—
	Robert —	"	30 Jun. 1919	"	—
Grand-parents*	Diedrich Burmester		29 Nov 1840	Neukrug Germany	9 Dec 1913 Petaluma
	Catharina Dorothea M. Strodthoff		10 Apr 1840	Kirchseelte Germany	26 Dec. 1933 Petaluma
	Pietro Paolo Benedetto-Riss		~~13~~ 19 Feb 1847	Cima Sappada Italy	22 Jan 1922 Petaluma
	Rosa Benedetto Sinder		23 Jan 1847	"	" "
Spouse	M1 - Mary-Alice Herswill		~~1 May~~ 1 Sep. 1909	Oakland CA	
	M2 Zoe Alice Barrons -		31 May 1915	Detroit MI	
Children	Alan F. Burmester		9 Feb 1937	Urbana IL	
	Bruce F.	"	30 Jul 1940	Urbana IL	
	Elizabeth A	"	29 Sep 1943	Lansing MI	
Grandchildren	Kimberley	Sue Burmester	4 July 1961	San Diego CA	
	Jeffrey	Alan "	15 May 1965	Midland MI	
	Pamela	Ann "	21 Nov 1971	adopted 13 Jan 1972	
	Andrew	D. Burmester	29 Nov 1974	CA	
	Betsy	A Burmester	30 Oct 1979	CA	
	Julie	L. Alderman	31 Aug 1976	CA	
	David	S. Alderman	12 Sept 1980	CA	

*Please include maiden name of mother and grandmothers.

THANK YOU!